



OMISIÓN Y CONFUSIÓN: SIX WAYS SCHOOLS OF CHOICE ADVERTISE THEIR APPROACH TO TEACHING EMERGING BILINGUALS



Over the past three decades, as policymakers have expanded choice-based policies where parental preferences replace geographically based school assignments, K-12 schools have increasingly focused on selling themselves to prospective students. In an article published earlier this year in the peer-reviewed *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Andrew H. Hurie of the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and NEPC Fellow [Deb Palmer](#) of the University of Colorado Boulder examine how schools in one of the nation's most choice-focused cities are marketing themselves to one important group of students who have historically been under-represented in schools of choice: emerging bilinguals.

The context is Milwaukee, a high-choice city where roughly half the students participate in school choice by attending charter schools, open enrolling into a district other than their own, or using public funds to pay for private schools via the nation's oldest urban school voucher program.

Hurie and Palmer aim to identify how choice schools market their approach to teaching emerging bilinguals. Do they describe an education that provides true bilingual and bicultural education that helps children become biliterate? Or do they offer something else?

The study draws upon a wealth of detailed data: 150 hours of observations at a bilingual public school, 16 semi-structured interviews with teachers, staff members, and administrators associated with that school, eight focus groups, five oral history interviews, geospatial

mapping, and document analyses of school websites and other materials.

The authors identify six main strategies that charter and voucher schools in their focal neighborhood (the Near South Side, which is home to a high concentration of low-income Spanish-speaking families) use as they advertise their approach to instructing emerging bilinguals.

1. **Adornment:** This strategy is employed by nearly one in three schools of choice included in the study. This approach addresses the use of Spanish (the language most frequently spoken by the city's emerging bilinguals) in a "superficial and decorative manner, as opposed to the language forming a central part of official social practices at the school." Often, this involves sprinkling Spanish words or phrases here and there, or showing a photo that includes a multilingual symbol (e.g., a book written in Spanish) without actually referencing multilingualism in the school's description.

Example: *The principal "hosts monthly 'Café con la Principal' as a way to plan activities for the school with parents as the driving force."*

2. **Omission:** Close to one in three schools avoid mentioning multilingualism altogether, despite the city's long history of emphasizing—at least in writing—bilingual and bicultural education.

Example: *"Students participate in religion, math, reading, language arts, science, social studies, art, general music and physical education classes."*

3. **English support:** About a quarter of schools described approaches in which students are immersed in English while receiving some support in their native language (e.g., by working with bilingual paraprofessionals). In these schools, Spanish language development and literacy are apparently not a goal.

Example: *"Bilingual teaching staff and assistants help Spanish speaking students be fully immersed in the English Language."*

4. **Guarded inclusion:** About one in five schools embraced Spanish to a limited degree by making passing references to addressing bilingualism and biculturalism.

Example: *"Our Catholic faith is at the center of everything we do. Students participate in daily prayer in English and Spanish, weekly mass with a Spanish mass once per month, and participate in religious holidays and celebrations such as Our Lady of Guadalupe and Las Posadas."*

5. **Ambiguity:** Fifteen percent of schools alluded to Spanish language instruction but did so in an ambiguous and misleading manner that obscured the very limited nature of the offerings, which was not evident without a great deal of further investigation.

Example: *A school advertised its "dual language" program for Spanish- and English-dominant speakers, but closer examination revealed that this approach ended in third grade.*

6. **Development:** Just one of the 20 schools promoted what actually appeared to be genuine bilingual and bicultural education "with the goal of developing multilingual students' full bilingualism and biliteracy."

Example: *“Through academic content, we are developing both languages of our students beginning in K4 so that by the time they graduate from 8th grade students are bilingual, biliterate, and bicultural.”*

The article also illustrates the challenge of navigating this system, through a rich description of one working-class Mexican father’s choice process for his child.

Hurie and Palmer conclude by expressing the hope that their glossary might help families and communities highlight discrepancies between approaches to education that they want and actual school offerings. That is, by naming some of the deceptive marketing practices employed by schools of choice that seemingly aim to attract bilingual and bicultural families, the authors hope to improve the choice process.

They also call for school administrators and policymakers to attend to the aspirations of emerging bilinguals and their families: “Instead of school choice’s individualized market-based project, we assert the ultimate need to redefine education for multilingual children as a community-grounded, collective endeavor for the public good.”

NEPC Resources on School Choice

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